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Big brother is watching

Evolving relations between Iran and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The relationship between Iran and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) will remain securitised in the short term due to the unresolved business of a return to the nuclear deal and its possible aftermath, the gradual reduction of the US military footprint in Iraq and the strengthening hold on power of Iran's conservatives. Iran's response to the Iraqi Kurdish referendum for independence in 2017 and its suppression of the revival of armed activity by Iranian Kurdish parties operating from Iraq makes it clear that Tehran does not hesitate to intervene to defend its security interests either. Iran is also likely to seek to counter growing Turkish intrusiveness in northern Iraq. Because the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) is currently weak and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) stuck between Turkey, dissatisfaction with its own rule and pro-Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) sentiments among segments of Kurdish public opinion, the KRI is more vulnerable to Iranian and Turkish pressure than it used to be. In other words, dependency and dominance will continue to characterise the Iran-KRI relation to Tehran's benefit for the foreseeable future. Ironically, deeper integration of the KRI into a federal Iraq could reduce this risk in the medium-term.

1 Introduction

The relationship between Iraq's Kurdish political parties, Turkey and Iran – first the Shah and later the Islamic Republic – has always been important to the power balance of the northern half of the Middle East. Before 2003, Iran viewed Iraq's Kurds mostly as a buffer between themselves and Arab Iraq whereas the Kurds of Iraq considered Iran mostly as sponsor of their insurgencies against various Iraqi governments. Yet, significant shifts occurred within this broader strategic frame. For example, during the 1970s and 1980s the relationship between Iran and Iraq's Kurds – chiefly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) –

was generally cordial. The relationship subsequently deteriorated in the 1990s when Iraq's Kurdish political parties fought a civil war between themselves, which allowed Iran to increase its influence by taking advantage of Iraqi Kurdish divisions and weakness. Iran also developed a working relationship with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) during this period. Next, Iran's sway diminished following the creation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) after the 2003 US invasion, mostly due to US sponsorship of the KRI and improved relations between Iraq's Kurdish parties (especially the KDP) and Turkey and various European countries.

Box 1 Situating the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Iraq's Kurdistan region has long functioned as a northern gateway from Iran into Iraq and vice versa as the two countries share a 600 kilometre border. Three key border crossings between Iraq and Iran are situated inside the Kurdistan region: the Haji Omaran crossing (accessed from Erbil), the Bashmakh crossing, and the Parweezkhan crossing (accessed from Sulaymani). The Iraq-Iran border area has also long been used by Iranian Kurdish opposition parties in their fight for freedom and greater rights. Currently, most of the Iraqi side is controlled by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), with Kurdish Iranian armed opposition groups controlling small sections. The Iranian side is under the control of Iranian security forces.

Today, the Iranian-KRI relationship is one of dependency and dominance in Tehran's favor. It is likely that this state of affairs will deepen in the near future. There are several factors that play a notable role including:

- the impact of the war against Islamic State (IS) (2014–2017) and the failure of the Kurdish referendum for independence (2017)
- the strong relationship between the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Turkish Kurdish-origin PKK, and their increasing confrontation with the Iraqi Kurdish KDP¹
- the reduction of the US military footprint in Iraq
- growing Turkish assertiveness and its extended campaign against the PKK in northern Iraq²
- the strengthening hold on power of conservatives in Iran and the future of the nuclear deal.

While Iran and the KRI profess to wish to improve their economic and trade

partnership,³ as well as to establish mutually beneficial security arrangements, the reality is a more prosaic joust to maintain power or increase influence. Broadly speaking, Iran is likely to increase its involvement in the KRI in the short term to mitigate PUK weakness (its traditional Iraqi Kurdish partner), counter Ankara's aggressive push against the PKK, and to offset the reduction of the US military footprint in Iraq.

Even though the KDP, which is closer to Turkey than Iran, has managed to establish its dominance over the KRI over the past few years, it is in a precarious position. This is due to the fact that the PKK has improved its strategic position via its Syrian venture in the form of the YPG, partial US withdrawal and popular dissatisfaction with its own rule (such dissatisfaction extends to the PUK), which also prevents it from siding visibly with Turkey against the PKK.

1 This factor is discussed in detail in: Netjes, R. and E. van Veen, *Henchman, Rebel, Democrat, Terrorist: The YPG/PYD during the Syrian conflict*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2021.

2 This factor will be discussed in a forthcoming Clingendael brief (March 2022). See also: Van Veen, E., E. Yüksel and H. Tekines, *Waiting for blowback: The Kurdish question and Turkey's new regional militarism*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2020.

3 KRI-Iran trade increased from a few hundred million dollars in 1999 to US\$4 billion in 2013 and US\$6 billion in 2021. See: Dabbagh, Nazim 2013, *KRI-Iran Trade Relations*, [online](#); Faqeyani, Hiwa 2021 *Size of the KRI-Iran Economic Exchange Revealed*, [online](#) (both accessed 14 February 2022). Overall, Iran has become the second biggest economic partner of the KRI after Turkey, with a focus on the areas of Sulaymani and Halabjah. It is worth noting, however, that the economic relationship is heavily skewed in Iran's favour, with exports to the KRI outstripping imports from the KRI roughly by a factor 50. See: Nuchanet 2021 *Size of Trade Exchange Between Iran and the KRI Rising*, [online](#) (accessed 14 February 2022). In other words, the KRI serves largely as an export market for Iran.

This brief assesses how three of the five factors outlined above are likely to affect relations between Iran and the KRG in the near future: 1) the fight against IS and the 2017 referendum; 2) US troop reductions; and 3) the growing hold on power of Iran's conservatives. It seeks to help shed light on where the relationship might be going next,⁴ and what the relevance of such a shift is likely to be for regional geopolitical competition.⁵

2 On Islamic State and the 2017 referendum for independence

The rise and fall of Islamic State (IS) (2014–2017) and the failed Kurdish independence referendum of 2017 negatively influenced the KRI–Iranian relationship since Iran viewed both with serious misgivings. However, the core of the relationship returned to a positive and supportive state once the status quo ante had been restored.

Initially, Iraqi Kurdish elites did not regard IS as a critical threat but, rather more pragmatically, as a potential new neighbour.

For example, Masoud Barzani analysed the swift rise of IS in an address to the Kurdistan Parliament in Erbil on 3 July 2014 and reflected on how it reshaped the borders and politics of Iraq. He recognised the newly self-proclaimed Islamic State by stating that: "... naturally, we share a border of 1,050 kilometres with a newly-established state. No matter whether we consider them terrorists or not, the reality is that we share borders with some other people. We only have 15 kilometres with the Iraqi federal government [left]."⁶ Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani added that "one day, we woke up in the morning and saw a new country is our neighbour."⁷ Such statements raised eyebrows in Tehran not only because it did not appreciate talk of 'Kurdish borders' or any depiction of the KRI as a country, but because IS was anathema to it as an extremist Sunni movement close to its own borders.

Nevertheless, Iran swiftly armed and assisted both the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga and other Iraqi forces in their fight against IS. As Nazim Dabbagh – representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government in the Islamic Republic of Iran – puts it: "... Iran did not protect Iraq from IS because of our beautiful eyes, but because Tehran wanted to protect and defend its borders from an aggressive force. In fact, the geo-location of the Kurdistan Region for Iran enabled Tehran to prevail in the war with IS."⁸ KRG Peshmerga even managed to take control of large parts of Iraq's 'disputed territories' (disputed between the country's Kurdish and Arab elites) during their fight with IS as a result of the initial withdrawal of Iraqi Security Forces. This included the oil-rich area of Kirkuk.

4 We consider these relations from an elite perspective due to the authoritarian nature of governance in both the KRI and Iran. Neither their populations nor their parliaments have much of a say in foreign policy formulation. This is not to deny substantial representational problems, but rather to reflect reality as it is.

5 The brief benefited from in-depth interviews with Professor Dr Abbas Vali, a Kurdish political and social theorist specialising in modern and contemporary Middle Eastern politics; Nazim Dabbagh, a representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government in the Islamic Republic of Iran; Dr Aso Hassanzadeh, a senior Iranian KDP official and former deputy secretary; and another academic who prefers not to be named. Note that the topic covered by this brief is not well researched and the number of publications on the Iran–KRI relation remains limited. The brief is best read as an exploration of the subject. I wish to thank Erwin van Veen (Clingendael), Dastan Jasim (German Institute for Global and Area Studies) and Alam Saleh (The Australian National University) for their constructive comments on the brief. The contents naturally remain my own responsibility.

6 Masoud Barzani's speech at the Kurdistan Parliament, July 2014, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JibmjbGXyo0> (accessed 7 December 2021).

7 Rudaw interview with Qubad Talabani, 5 July 2014, see: <https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/interview/05072014-amp> (accessed 7 December 2021).

8 WhatsApp interview with Nazim Dabbagh, representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government in the Islamic Republic of Iran, September 2021.

Buoyed by these gains, Barzani called for the 2017 referendum despite Turkey, the US, Baghdad and Iran all being set against it. According to Dabbagh, Iranian decision makers made it clear to every visiting KRG delegation that: “Even if we do not oppose you, we will not defend you when you are attacked. However, if you do not hold the referendum, we will support you and defend your rightful demands within the context of the Iraqi Constitution.”⁹

It should be recalled that Iran’s policy on Iraqi Kurdistan has always been formulated and implemented by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Ministry of Intelligence of the Islamic Republic of Iran (MOIS). For decades, Qassim Soleimani was Tehran’s spokesperson. While he pursued Iranian interests to the best of his abilities, he was also supportive of Iraqi Kurdish demands and concerns.¹⁰ During preparations for the referendum, he urged Kurdish leaders to annul it and instead offered to help bring about the implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution to settle the future of the disputed areas between the KRG and the Iraqi government. When the KDP and PUK pushed ahead with the referendum, Soleimani had a hand in the Iraqi operation that recaptured Kirkuk, pushing the Peshmerga back into the KRI. Nevertheless, Iranian relations with the KRG were normalised soon afterwards at his behest.¹¹ According to Dabbagh, this was mostly because Iran views the Kurdistan region as a bridge into Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.¹²

It is, however, no accident that a number of Iranian Kurdish parties have resumed their armed struggle against Tehran during recent years. In part they have been

encouraged by Barzani’s KDP by way of a countermove against Iran’s reaction to KDP independence claims. For example, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) deployed forces on the Iran-Iraq border where the PKK has had bases for a long time. This move was copied by its sister party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP – not to be confused with Barzani’s KDP) and Komala (yet another party), which also established bases in the border areas to send fighters into Iranian Kurdistan. Additional underlying drivers for these moves – beyond KDP nudges – include:

- The KDPI, KDP (Iran) and Komala anticipated a US strike on Iran as a result of the failure of the nuclear deal that would have allowed them to organise and arm Kurdish youth and send them into Iran (akin to the PKK sending its forces into Syria to expand via the YPG when the Assad regime was weak).
- The financial crisis in the KRI caused these same three parties to search for new funding sources. A presence on the Iraq-Iran border road was helpful in this regard as it enables the levying of a toll on alcohol smugglers.
- The parties need new recruits as their present forces are getting older and many are leaving their camps in the KRI to request asylum in Western countries.

Although KDPI, KDP (Iranian Kurdish) and Komala understand that Masoud Barzani is using them as a counter against Iran, they have little choice but to go along with him given their guest-like status in the KRI. Their ultimate goal, however, is to connect the armed struggle on the Iraq-Iran border with the underground struggle in Iranian Kurdistan by recruiting younger generations and organising them in Iranian Kurdish cities. Their thinking has been inspired by the Free Life Kurdistan Party (PJAK, a PKK franchise of mostly Iranian Kurds) taking up arms again and increasing its popularity among the youth of Kermanshah and Sanandaj (Kurdish Iranian cities) and other areas. Figure 1 below clarifies the key relationships between these actors.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Katzman, Kenneth, *Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies*, Congressional Research Service 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/R44017.pdf>

¹¹ Jawhar, Sartip, *Some of the Secrets of the Referendum*, Qandil24, 2020, [online](#) (accessed 7 December 2021).

¹² WhatsApp interview with Nazim Dabbagh, representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government in the Islamic Republic of Iran, September 2021.



KDPI, KDP (Iran) and Komala moves-towards-the-border were soon challenged by the PKK as there was no enabling prior agreement between the two sides, leading to clashes between KDPI and PKK forces. As well as in incurring a number of casualties, the KDPI, KDP (Iran) and Komala did not succeed in establishing a durable presence and had to fall back to their camps in the KRI. Iran has furthermore made it clear that its 'strategic calmness' will not last forever, and has supported such statements with the resumption of assassinations of Iranian Kurdish politicians and Peshmerga cadres,¹³ as well as occasional IRGC rocket strikes and drone attacks on Kurdish Iranian

parties inside the KRI.¹⁴ Moreover, Iran-linked Shi'a armed groups in Iraq regularly conduct similar attacks on US army bases in the Kurdistan region – all of which serves to underline KRI vulnerability.

As Dabbagh puts it: "[...] especially if the Iranians know that an armed Kurdish-Iranian opposition attacks Iranian territory from the Kurdistan region, and if that force reveals itself to be operating and training within the KRI, the Iranians will not accept that. Therefore, the Iranians will counter-attack, especially after the killing of the Iranian nuclear scientist Fakhrizadeh revealed that some agents entered Iran via the KRI."¹⁵

13 SharPress, *Iran Once Again Threatens the Kurdistan Region*, October 2021, [online](#); İdris Okuducu, *Iranian Kurdish Opposition in Erbil May Suffer as a Result of a US Withdrawal*, September 2021, [online](#) (both accessed 7 December 2021).

14 Reuters, *Iran's Guards target Kurdish rebels in Iraqi Kurdistan* – report, September 2021, [online](#) (accessed 7 December 2021). From 1991 to the present, c. 300 Kurdish Iranian opposition party leaders and cadres have been assassinated inside the KRI by Iranian agents. See: Hawramy, Fazil. *Assassinations mount as Iranian Kurdish militants clash with Tehran*, Al-Monitor, [online](#) 2018 (accessed September 2021).

15 WhatsApp interview with Nazim Dabbagh, representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government in the Islamic Republic of Iran, September 2021.

On the whole, the aftermath of the Kurdish referendum for independence demonstrated to the KRI leadership the necessity of accommodating Iranian interests. The point was especially brought home by the loss of Kirkuk. The revival of armed activity by Iranian Kurdish parties as a counterpressure tactic has so far been unsuccessful and has even backfired. Both instances illustrate that Iran does not tolerate transgression of its security red lines. These have been thrown into even starker relief by concerns about growing Israeli influence in the area, including the fact that the recent Azeri-Armenian conflict was fought in part with Israeli weapons.¹⁶

3 The withdrawal of US forces from Iraq – and Afghanistan

Iraq's Kurds have talked of American "betrayals" ever since the 1970s. Casting themselves as victims of great power politics, they continue to believe that – to correct past wrongdoings – the international community owes them. Additionally, they have tended to turn their observation of US hostility towards Iran into an assumption that Washington will never leave Iraq's Kurds to fend for themselves. However, three incidents over the past few years have changed dramatically the perspectives of the KRI's political elites on the US:

- US pressure on the Kurdish leadership to avoid holding a referendum on the independence of the Kurdistan Region in 2017
- abrupt partial withdrawal from the north and east of Syria, which allowed the Turkish army and its Syrian auxiliary forces to invade several Syrian Kurdish areas
- US withdrawal from Afghanistan as warning of a potentially similar scenario in Iraq.

¹⁶ Entesar, Nadir, *The Kurdish Factor in Iran-Iraq Relations*, the Middle East Institute, 2009, [online](#). (accessed 14 December 2021).

It has slowly dawned on both the KDP and PUK that the partial US withdrawal will leave them at the greater mercy of Iran and Turkey as the key regional power and influential actor in Iraqi politics.

Iraq's Kurds also worry that the Saudi-Iranian negotiations mediated by Baghdad will strengthen the Iraqi state and eventually hurt Kurdish accomplishments in Iraq's quasi-federal setup. This is because a number of Kurdish achievements violate constitutional stipulations, for example the fact that Erbil pursues an independent foreign policy and exports oil from the KRI without recourse to Baghdad.¹⁷ As a harbinger of things to come, Iraq's Federal Supreme Court ruled a 2007 KRI oil and gas law to be unconstitutional on 15 February 2022, as well as any KRG-concluded oil/gas contracts. It ordered the KRG to hand its crude over to the federal oil ministry in Baghdad instead of exporting it independently. Depending on the political negotiation that will inevitably ensue, this verdict could significantly impact the structure and nature of the KRG.¹⁸

Even though the likelihood of full US withdrawal from Iraq is low given a) the US presence in Syria for which Iraq serves as supply route, b) ongoing nuclear tensions with Iran, c) the fact that Washington is unlikely to leave Iraq entirely in Tehran's sphere of influence, d) the low cost of the US presence in Iraq (compared with Afghanistan) and e) the low visibility of the US presence in Iraq in Washington, it is the shift in perception that matters. With less faith in the US, the KRI leadership is more likely to focus on improving relations with Turkey and Iran. As Iran has so far emerged unbowed and unbroken from its confrontation with Washington despite the population living in poverty, it is likely that the KDP in particular

¹⁷ Hadad, Hamzah, *Iraq's Foreign Policy lacks Domestic Consensus*, Iraqi1001thoughts, 2021, [online](#) (accessed 14 December 2021).

¹⁸ See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-federal-court-deems-kurdish-oil-gas-law-unconstitutional-2022-02-15/>; for a short commentary by @UticaRisk: <https://twitter.com/UticaRisk/status/1494727815790534661> (both accessed 3 March 2022).

will become more cooperative and take Iranian concerns closer to heart.

The reduced US military footprint and the perceived risk of US withdrawal means that Washington's role as sponsor of the KRI will diminish. This becomes even more salient if one considers the position of the KDP, PUK and KRG. The KDP is under growing pressure from both Turkey and the PKK. It is forced to accommodate the former due to its dependency in terms of trade and oil exports, among other things, but cannot act against the PKK due to its own poor governance track record and sympathies for the PKK among the KRI's population. To balance Turkey, it needs Iran, which can also help mitigate some of the tensions with the YPG and PKK as it maintains a working relationship with both. The PUK is currently weak as it is going through a period of internal strife. This is illustrated by the recent coup of PUK co-chair Bafel Talabani and Kurdistan Region Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani against PUK co-chair Lahour Talabani (who is also their cousin). In brief, the PUK is more vulnerable than usual to Iranian influence, which is reinforced by its proximity. Finally, the KRG has always struggled to govern as a coherent body due to the fact that its leadership is divided between two ruling parties (KDP and PUK) and two families (Barzani and Talabani) that have different regional interests and continue to mistrust each other (e.g. they struggle to move beyond the traumas of their 1990s civil war). What unites these parties is mostly a desire to maintain the status quo and prevent changes to their duopoly over the KRI.

4 Conservatives strengthening their hold on power in Iran

In his meeting with Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani in August 2021, Iranian President Raisi indicated that the level of interaction between Iran and Iraq, and especially the Kurdistan Region, was far from favourable from his point of view. He added: "We should take firm steps to use all available capacities and increase the welfare of our people with

certain mechanisms."¹⁹ In the same meeting, President Barzani remarked that, "We are determined to begin a new chapter in the economic, cultural and political relations between the Kurdistan Region as part of Iraq and Iran." He further went on to say, "we consider ourselves a part of Iran and the Islamic Revolution."²⁰

Together, these statements seem to signal a positive direction for a multi-layered relationship between Iran and the KRI. Yet, Abbas Vali (a Kurdish political and social theorist) doubts there will be much change since the IRGC remains in charge of Iran's policies towards Iraq and the KRI. Broadly speaking, he expects the new Iranian government, like its predecessors, to pursue three related objectives in Iraqi Kurdistan:²¹

- combat US/Israeli influence and reduce/marginalise their active presence²²
- counter Turkish presence and influence
- use the KRI to advance its own objectives on the broader Iraqi political scene – in particular, marginalisation of US-linked political parties.

19 Iran Presidency, *Ayatollah Raisi in a meeting with the President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region*, August 2021, <https://www.president.ir/en/130380> (accessed 7 December 2021).

20 Islamic Republic News Agency, *In Meeting With Kurdistan Region of Iraq President*, August 2021, <https://www.irna.ir/news/84428393/> ریس، جمهوری-شرایط-مناسب-برای-تقویت-روابط-ایران-و-عراق-فراهیم (accessed 9 December 2021).

21 WhatsApp interview with Professor Abbas Vali, a Kurdish political and social theorist specialising in modern and contemporary political thought and modern Middle Eastern politics, September 2021.

22 Iraqi Kurdish relations with the Mossad go back to 1965–1975, during Mullah Mustafa Barzani's 'Aylul Revolution'. See for instance: <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/a-former-senior-mossad-officer-looks-back-on-his-career-674654> (accessed 14 February 2022). During the 2017 independence referendum, Israel publicly supported the KRG. Tel Aviv has also profited from KRG-Baghdad disputes to purchase KRI oil at advantageous prices, while pro-KDP media have promoted Israel-KRI relations. This has raised concerns in Tehran, primarily around intelligence sharing and cooperation.

What needs to be kept in mind is that Iran is not a democracy and has never promoted any notion of democracy in the Kurdistan region since at least as far back as the tenure of President Ahmadinejad. Iran has in fact exercised its influence in the KRI largely through the same political figures and parties for decades, i.e. the KDP and PUK, neither of which are themselves paragons of democracy. This limits the ability of new, more democratic forces and figures to rise. In this vein, Iran refused to engage with the Gorran Movement after its electoral success in 2013, despite overtures from its leader Nawshirwan Mustafa. For Iran, a strong PUK zone is always preferable to balance the KDP's proximity to Turkey and it continues to distrust the Gorran Movement, whose leadership supports balanced relations and neutrality in regional conflicts. Iran also played a role in blocking current Iraqi President Barham Salih from being nominated back in 2014. Iran's concern, which was reflected in the PUK party's decision making over who to nominate for the post, was that Barham Salih was too much of a pro-West liberal politician to be trusted to protect Iranian interests.

These tendencies are likely to be reinforced by Iran's conservatives now that they hold both a parliamentary majority and the presidency, with growing IRGC influence across the Iranian government. As long as a return to the nuclear deal remains uncertain, security and economic considerations will continue to colour the Iranian view on the KRI and incentivise Tehran to optimise its relational dominance. For example, consider the flourishing formal and informal cross-border trade that includes mutually profitable smuggling of KRI and Kirkuk-origin oil for use in Iran's domestic market or for reselling onto international markets via Bandar Imam (Iran).

5 Contextualising key factors shaping the Iran-KRI relationship

Historically, Iran successfully manipulated Iraqi Kurdish forces to the benefit of its own conflicts with Baghdad. In the words of Hardi Mahdi and Azhi Abubakr (Kurdish academics): "Iran took advantage of the Kurdish Movement in the 1970s by using it to pressure the Iraqi state to realise strategic objectives – such as a favourable demarcation of water and land boundaries – dropping its support for the Kurdish insurgency when Iran reached an agreement with the Iraqi government in Algeria."²³

In the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), it was initially the KDP that got closer to Iran. In 1983, the KDP helped the Iranian army make gains in northern Iraq (Haji Omaran), in response to which the Iraqi regime massacred at least 4,000 innocent camp inhabitants of the Barzani tribe. Towards the end of the war, Iran brought all Kurdish parties together into an umbrella formation known as the Kurdistan Front. By now, the PUK was the leading party of the eight that made up the Front.²⁴ As van Bruinessen astutely observed:

“Eager though both Iran and Iraq are to pacify their own Kurds, each has an obvious interest in keeping alive the Kurdish resistance in the neighboring country. Iran has given quite substantial support to Barzani's sons and their Iraqi KDP, and to a few ostensibly Islamic groups of Iraqi Kurds. Iraq has given money, logistical support and arms to the two major organizations- the

23 Mahdi, H. & Azad, A. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq in Iran's General Politics, *Journal of University of Garmian* (2020). See: <https://doi.org/10.24271/garmian.20713>; Abdulkhaliq, Masoud, *The Identity of the Kurdish Political Parties*, 2nd Edition, Erbil: Haji Qadiri Koyi Publishing house, 2014.

24 Abdulkhaliq, Masoud, *The Identity of the Kurdish Political Parties*, 2014, 2nd Edition, Haji Qadiri Koyi Publishing house, Erbil; Van Bruinessen, M. (1986). The Kurds between Iran and Iraq, *MERIP Middle East Report*, 141, 14–27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3011925>.

*Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and the Komala, a smaller, radical left organization.*²⁵

During later internal Kurdish rivalries, Iran often sided with one party or the other. For example, when fighting broke out between the KDP and PUK in 1994, Iran first backed the KDP as it was historically more pro-Iran. Then, two years later, it increased its backing for the PUK when the KDP worked with Saddam Hussein's forces to recapture Erbil.²⁶ Geography also played a role in shifting the KDP closer to Turkey and the PUK closer to Iran.

Iranian divide-and-rule policies did not stop when the KRI and KRG were established in 2003–2005 as the latter remained vulnerable and weak in the political, economic and security sense. A new driver for Iranian policies towards the region was the fear that the creation of the KRI would inspire similar objectives in its own country. However, rather the opposite happened, since Iran could now force the KDP and the PUK to compel Iranian Kurdish parties resident on their newly demarcated territory to lay down arms. As a result, Kurdish-Iranian opposition parties left the Qandil mountains to settle in camps in lower-level areas – not because of Iranian shelling, but due to KRG pressure.²⁷ Iranian Kurdish parties called this retreat to the camps 'Kempnişîniî', which literally means residency in camps. In a sense, the creation of the KRI was a boon to Iraq's Kurds, but a blow to Iranian Kurds.

Looking ahead, it is likely that the two constituent parts of the Kurdish administration – the KDP and PUK – will continue to pursue their own interests, define their own objectives, and use different means and mechanisms for achieving these in the

competitive sphere of regional politics – just as they have historically.²⁸ This stands in contrast to KRG foreign policy towards actors further afield, such as the US, UK, EU, Russia or China and Japan, towards which it has acted more as a single block, creating the impression that it is an integrated administration pursuing uniform political objectives.

Abbas Vali explains this dual attitude as a result of push and pull factors. To begin with, regional rivals Turkey and Iran each wish to maintain influence over a local party in the KRI to maximise their influence in Erbil and Baghdad. But the division between KDP/Turkey and PUK/Iran has deeper political and ideological roots, even though relations are at times also diverse and contradictory. Either way, it stands to reason, he thinks, to assume that in the event of a US departure from Iraq, the KDP and PUK will continue to pursue different strategic objectives in policy and decision making.²⁹ To be more precise, the PUK will attempt to strengthen its clientelist relationship with Iran, while Iran will seek to put pressure on the KDP via the PUK to dominate the KRI. The KDP will look to Turkey to strengthen its own position and withstand Iranian-PUK pressure.

6 What's next for the Iranian-KRI relationship?

The preceding analysis has shown the relationship between Iran and the KRI to be asymmetric in nature. To Iran, the relationship has become a key element of its foreign policy towards the rest of the Middle East. The KRI serves as one of Iran's gateways to Syria and Lebanon, for example. Even though this function became less salient following the rise of Iran-linked Shi'a political parties in Baghdad and the departure of US forces from Iraq in 2011,

25 van Bruinessen (1986), *op.cit.*

26 Charountaki, Marianna, *Iran and Turkey International and Regional Engagement in the Middle East*, I.B.Tauris, 2018.

27 WhatsApp interview with Aso Hassanzadeh, October 2021; *Iranian Kurdish Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)*, Report from Danish Immigration Service's fact-finding mission to Erbil, Suleimaniyah and Dohuk, KRI, 7–24 March 2011.

28 Only the Gorran Movement has pushed for a balanced and neutral regional policy, but it has not been successful despite public support.

29 WhatsApp interview with Professor Abbas Vali in September 2021.

it remains relevant. For the PUK and KDP, Iran has mostly served as a big neighbour, which they sought to enlist to improve their own political and security position but at the risk of falling under its spell. When considering the three factors laid out in this brief, the following observations have relevance for the future:

Referendum. The failure of the 2017 Kurdish referendum in the face of opposition from Iran, Turkey, the US and Baghdad has cemented the status of the KRI as an element of a quasi-federal Iraq. The absence of international political support, pushback from the regional powers and the socioeconomic loss of the Kirkuk area have rendered an independent country unviable for the next decade or more. In this sense, the regional order has stabilised. But the referendum result also forced the KDP and PUK to pay more attention to both Iran and Turkey given US discouragement of the referendum and its declining military footprint in Iraq. This makes the regional order less stable given the unresolved US-Iran confrontation and Turkey's regional offensive against the PKK, which operates from the KRI.

US military presence. The US military's decreasing footprint in Iraq also necessitates the KRI to recalibrate and strengthen its relations with its bigger neighbours to secure its own position, including vis-à-vis Baghdad. The intended US 'pivot to Asia' makes it likely that US patronage will diminish. While Afghanistan is a case apart, it did accentuate the possibility that a similar withdrawal from Iraq may happen faster than anticipated. The problems for the KDP and PUK are their persisting mutual mistrust and the fact that the PUK is going through a period of internal weakness. As a result, it will be easier for Turkey and Iran to assert their preferences instead of having to develop a more balanced partnership in the face of Iraqi Kurdish unity.

Iranian conservatives. The strengthening hold on power of Iran's conservatives means that a securitised view of the KRI is likely to persist in Tehran, which will be amplified by the nuclear issue for as long as a new deal has not been agreed upon. A failure to do so will reignite tensions in Iraq between

US and Iran-linked elements, putting a premium on Iranian influence on the PUK and KRI. It is likely that Iran would continue to anticipate a possible threat of US military action against Tehran from the KDP part of the Kurdistan region. It is in part for this reason that Tehran recently exercised significant pressure on the KDP with regards to the competition between the KDP and PUK over Iraq's presidency. Quds Force general Ismail Qaani travelled to Baghdad and the KRI to make clear that Iran will only accept one KDP candidate, namely current KRI president Nechirvan Barzani, who has cordial ties with the US, Iran and Turkey.³⁰ However, Masoud Barzani nominated Rebar Ahmed (now KRG Minister for the Interior) after Hoshyar Zebari's candidature was put on hold. In turn, Iran clarified to Erbil that there will be consequences for the KDP and KRG if the presidency does not go to the PUK.³¹ Should a return to the nuclear deal be realised, however, business ties could improve quickly because Iranian companies will be free to invest and develop. In that case, Iran's security chiefs may see greater economic benefit in a stable Iraqi Kurdistan than a divided one.

On balance, the relative weakness of the KRI in the face of its big neighbours, along with its internal mistrust (PUK-KDP) and internal strife (PUK and KDP vs. PKK), means that the gradual loss of the US as patron will make the area more of a ground for contestation between Turkey (against the PKK, control over the Mosul area) and Iran (against the US, corridor towards Syria, control over the Kirkuk area) without much ability to resist. Ironically, the KRG could improve its position vis-à-vis Iran and Turkey by integrating itself more fully into the Iraqi quasi-federal state, but this would require a reimagining of its future.

30 KurdPress *Iran Quds Force commander visited Erbil to meet KDP officials* 2022 (accessed 14 February 2022) <https://kurdpress.com/en/news/2053/Iran-Quds-Force-commander-visited-Erbil-to-meet-KDP-officials/>

31 Confidential interview with an official in the KRI executive, 13 February 2022.

Recommendations

In terms of recommendations as to how external actors like the European Union can help prevent conflict and promote good neighbourly relations, the fundamental problem in the Iran-KRI relationship is that it is highly securitised. From this perspective, the following ideas are useful to consider:

- EU support for a return to the nuclear deal remains essential. This would remove a major impediment towards more peaceful postures and, ultimately, take some of the security angle out of KRI-Iranian relations. Concretely, the EU can contribute by thinking harder about guarantees it can give to Iran that any return to the nuclear deal will be secure as long as Tehran adheres to its conditions, as well as concrete investment promises that can make a return more attractive.
- The EU can offer support in reopening and/or improving operating effectiveness of border crossing points between Iran and the KRI to promote trade and create greater economic incentives for the future development of the relationship. Currently, Haji Omaran, Bashmakh and Parwezkhan are formal border points. However, two new official border points could be opened in Qaladze and Halabjah to ease existing pressure points and improve connectivity.
- As long as divisions within the KRI continue, the region will remain vulnerable to pressure from its big neighbours, Iran included. Reducing KRI dependence on Iran is necessary to improve the maturity and quality of the relationship but this requires the KDP-PUK to develop greater mutual trust. The EU and its Member States can support a Kurdish-Kurdish dialogue in the KRI to this effect, possibly in collaboration with UNAMI. A key objective should be to develop a pathway to 'nationalise' and professionalise the armed and security forces of both parties to reduce securitisation and give more regular politics a chance to work.

Finally, another core issue is to address the matter of Kurdish autonomy in Iran itself. As long as the socio-political concerns and needs of Iran's Kurds are not addressed in a more constructive manner, the KRI-Iran relationship will remain difficult. Progress requires Iran to engage in a – mostly domestic – political initiative that puts the IRGC in the backseat and starts a constructive dialogue with Iranian Kurdish parties inside and outside the country. This, however, is difficult at the best of times and not realistic as long as tensions around the nuclear deal persist.

About the Clingendael Institute

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